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# THE RISE OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN UZBEKISTAN

By

M. Bakhrom, Madrakhimov, O-3, Uzbekistan Air Force  
(International Officer)

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Advisor: Anthony Ring

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

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## ***Preface***

The study examined the causes and effects the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan after the country gained its independence from Soviet Union.

This topic has been selected because the Islamic fundamentalism as a nationalist wave menaces the security and future stability not just in the Uzbekistan territory, but also for entire Central Asia region. The study gives readers some ideas of recommendation and possible solutions to the problem.

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### ***Abstract***

This paper will examine religion of Islam in Uzbekistan in order for better understanding the facts, which caused the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism in the newly independence country of Central Asia region.

The study begins with a conception of religion Islam during the post-Soviet era and after the country gained its independence from the Soviet Union. Here I am going to discuss how Islam was driven underground and its institutions were significantly undermined. Next aspect was a condition of Islam after signing the declaration of independence Republic of Uzbekistan in 1991. This part of the study includes the revival process of Islam, where in the country's life Islam has rapidly risen, including cultural traditions. The core part of the study analyzes common factors, which play vital impact the rise Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan. Lastly the study covers possible solutions to the problem.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **ORIENTATION TO TOPIC**

In Uzbekistan the most dominant religion is Islam religion. According to statistics 88% of the Uzbek population are Muslim (the rest of population is 9% Eastern orthodox Christian, and 3% other religions). During the post-Soviet era its role, as other religions, in the culture of the people was unknown because the communist regime pursued the policy of militant atheism. As a result that status of Islam in Uzbekistan and its institution were significantly undermined. In general Islam was driven underground, functioning only as an individual confession among the Uzbek people.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 this process of nation-state building and the role of Islam has rapidly risen and it has played a significant role in unifying the people. Today Uzbekistan has experienced a significant revival of interest in the practice of Islam. Of course, as the fact that evaluating values of the independence Uzbekistan has met some new problems having deal with the revival process of Islamic and its consciousness has become into the region in variety of forms.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that cause the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan. The research question, which the paper seeks to address, is “What factors are caused in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan”. The research object in this study examines the causes the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan in an order to develop solutions for avoiding the potential problems Islamic fundamentalism, which are caused by some radical elements. The study assesses a number of factors capable of having an impact on the process of the Islamic fundamentalism. These factors can be external such as the impact or influence of the Islamic fundamentalism from other Muslim countries. Because the problem with Islamic fundamentalism has its origin from other Islamic States, and as internal factors can be first socio-economic determinants and next ignorance of the people of Islam religion.

The study will use the descriptive research method. The literature review seeks to determine the common factors, which caused the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan after the country gained its independence from Soviet Union in 1991.



## **Chapter 2**

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **RELIGION DURING THE POST-SOVIET ERA:**

The history of Uzbekistan (historical name-Maverannahr) has its origin in the eighth century A.D. The first outsiders who came into Uzbekistan were Islamic Arabs, which brought to the region new religion and culture, which continue to be dominant in the region, and the last conquest the territory of Uzbekistan was by the Russians. Thus this part of research will provide an historical overview to Uzbekistan since the Russian invasion in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and a consideration of the role of Islam religion in Uzbek history.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Czarist troops invaded Central Asia. The Russian ignored Islam and focused on expansion. During the Czarist era Islam was tolerated as a local religion in the entire territory of Uzbekistan. This tolerance changed after the Bolshevik revolution took place. After the Socialistic Revolution in 1917 the Bolsheviks turned their attention towards Islam, because it was the antithesis to Marxist and Leninist ideology. By 1920, Soviet Russia suppressed Islam religion in Uzbekistan. In 1924, Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic was born.

After early concessions to the Muslims, to win support for the Soviet Union, the Soviet government viewed Islam as political and ideological threat and set out to destroy

it like all other religious. Thousands of Islamic religious devotees were subjected to repression. Thousands of mosques and hundreds of madrasah [religion schools], which were building of great architectural and historical significance for the people and world civilization, were destroyed. The people who had practice Islam were even prohibited from having access to the Koran.<sup>1</sup>

Stalinist regime from 1924 to 1953 strictly controlled Islam and regulated Islamic practice through state law and regulations. Soviet officials confiscated religious property and either placed mullah [religion clergies] under strict government control or forced them out of their religious positions. Soviet policy relaxed during the Second World War. The Soviets allowed registered clerics to worship within the constraints of the state-sponsored Islam. The public and institutional Islam was particularly vulnerable to Soviet efforts to limit the influence of religion in the region. Religion knowledge among the people was relatively undeveloped because the government made major efforts to control official Islam during that era. However the Soviet government controlled and largely brought under the system of state regulation.

As an example of the Soviet style I remember as the fact that my grandfather had always hoped to pray with community in a public place such as in a mosque. Unfortunately he and others Muslims had no ability to participate and organize praying activities in our village mosque. Because *milisioners* (policemen) in morning and in evening time were searching that very old and small mosque, to find some opponents of the Soviet regime, there 20-25 men could place at that religious building. However I also remember that I had looked on the street for the policemen, because my grandfather and other his believers friends prayed at our home closing the house gate. Even praying with

group in private place was prohibited and it was against the communist totalitarian regime.

In spite of tight control by Soviet communist government, after the Second World War and until the independence of country, clandestine Islamic practice increased. Official control over Islam was unsuccessful and ineffective because religion believer populations of Uzbekistan continued to practice as well as learning and teaching process of Islam underground.<sup>2</sup> Even in the last years of Soviet control, there were hopes to renew interest of Islam. Certainly as the fact that communist party leaders in the region expressed worry about the apparent revival of Islam entire territory of Uzbekistan.

In general the people of Uzbekistan were largely isolated from the rest of the Muslim world community and religion customs of Islam were strengthened when theoretical studies and debate were also not allowed until independence in 1991.

### **ISLAM RELIGION AFTER THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE COUNTRY:**

The years of independence have fundamentally changed the public life in Uzbekistan. The most important single cultural commonality among the people came to practice of Islam and which is the professed religion of a very large majority of the people. Thanks to declaration of independence, the Uzbek people today have experienced a significant revival of Islam throughout entire territory of Uzbekistan. Thus in this part of the study we will discuss about revival process of Islam in Uzbekistan after the country gained its independence from Soviet Union in 1991.

The independence of the country allowed for more religious freedom, which resulted in and increases the role of Islam within Uzbek society. Islam has played a significant

role in unifying the people. Today in country's life a cultural and an educational aspect of Islam religion is growing in all parts of the country. The independence of the state prompted the spiritual and religious revival of society, the mentality of which had been influenced by the philosophy of Islamic cultural. The revival of Islamic and cultural values that have accumulated over a thousand years of national experience have become an important step along the road of self-determination and realization of cultural and historical unity of the Uzbek people. This is reflected in the increase in mosque construction, Islamic schools and the observance of Islamic rituals. For example in Uzbekistan by 1997, the number of the religion schools had increased from 80 to 5000.<sup>3</sup> Also as historical fact that in 1997 by the Uzbek government's initiative the first Islamic University in Central Asia region was established in Capital City Tashkent. This religious university educates its students in Islam. The university explores the tenets of Islam and as well as Islam historical and philosophical origins.

As the fact that the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 with its the atheistic style of ruling resulted increased number of believers to Islam. Today Muslim peoples of Uzbekistan have performed important acts of faith, such as fasting during the period of one month, and this ritual calls "Ramadan". Today as part of the Muslim world community the people of Uzbekistan have made pilgrimages to holy place in the Islam world Mecca and Medina, and also participation in Friday public prayers and mosque attendance. Unfortunately the resurgence of Islam has brought with it negative aspects, because the religion consciousness has come in a variety of forms to the Uzbek territory. Because the Uzbek nation today faces the dual challenges of building a secular democracy and allowing for free practice of Islam and other religions.

## **CAUSES THE RISE OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN UZBEKISTAN:**

Radical Islamic fundamentalism is indeed a serious treats to states and populations, not just for Moslem states, but also for entire the world community. Today the world community has witnessed event where Islamic fundamentalists act against humanity, and as example Islamic State such as Afghanistan where the population was repressed by a ultra conservative fundamentalist regime of Taliban. Under the Taliban political and religious diversity was ruthlessly were persecuted. Thus as the actual aspect in Uzbekistan this part of the research will provide discussion about the causes, which are possible factors in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan, and this analyze will include three aspects. First as external factor in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is influence outside the country where different individuals and religion organizations have brought variety tenets or ideas of Islam into Uzbekistan from different Islamic states. And second ones, as internal factors are ignorance the people of Islam during 74 years the Soviet anti-religious campaigns and the third, the socio-economic situation during the transition period of sovereignty.

Before to start this part of the study to avoid confusion situation I want to concentrate reader's attention to the term of Islamic Fundamentalism. To explain this terminology I would refer that Islamic fundamentalism as an aggressive revolutionary movement militant and violent as the Bolshevik, Fascist and Nazi movement of the past. All these movements have historically being intolerant of opposing views and groups. All these movements have historically resorted to violence and repression to silence the opposition.

The problem of Islamic fundamentalism has its origin in Uzbekistan since the country has started the establishing and strengthening of the state sovereignty, and when the state's borders opened to the world community. In general Islamic fundamentalism came into being slowly at the end of the nineteenth century, growing to adulthood in the twentieth. Only in the late 1970s did it become a generally recognized phenomenon in Islamic states.<sup>4</sup>

The independence has given more opportunities to the Uzbek nation for interacting with the world community. One of them as the main issue is development of Islam in Uzbekistan. Unfortunately as the result that in this openness Uzbekistan has experienced some new problems having to deal with diversity of Islam, because many different religion organizations and individuals have involved into the country with different conceptions of Islam. During the first years of independence, religion missionaries from Arab world began to actively penetrate into the peoples' life and generate ideas of Islam. Missionaries' purposes, at the beginning sovereignty, were to help the revival process of Islam in Uzbekistan and to organize teaching and educating processes of Islam in many different ways to the Uzbek people, particularly among the young population of the country. Today it might be a well know results that in the world many formal and informal movement exist which use Islam, show intolerance toward all other religions, and use Islam as a platform to defend narrow-minded national interests.<sup>5</sup> They were mainly emissaries of totally different Islamic Movements, parties and religious organizations from Arab countries, Pakistan and less frequently from Iran. Their plan is to involve the newly independence state of Central Asia as their political supporters and allies and exercise influence upon them is typical of their political purposes.<sup>6</sup> As

example, after the collapse of Soviet Union, in the country was found activists from Saudi Arabia's Wahhabis and Jordan's Hizb-ut Tahrir religious Islamic organizations. These two Islamic religion organizations advocates creating a Caliphate or Islamic theocracy in Uzbekistan, and they actively tried to practice political Islam ideas. Some Wahhabis are active supporters of the Taliban and al-Qaeda network, who share Wahhabi ideology, a set of ideas practiced in some Wahhabis starkest form by the Taliban.<sup>7</sup>

Members of these two foreign religion organizations that have been in the country since collapse the Soviet Union and have also actively influenced and supported the local antigovernment political opposition group, which has name: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), also it is known as Islamic Party of Turkestan. The IMU was found in late 1990 in Fergana valley, the area is located on western side of the Uzbek territory. In Uzbekistan the Fergana valley is known as the place where fundamentalism enjoys the strongest support from local inhabitants. The group's locations of operations at least before September 11, 2001 were Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The group originally focused on overthrowing the Uzbek government and replaces it with Islamic State. The group leaders have concentrated their mission to work with the youth. The young population has become good political instrument to use for the sake of power. The total number of members is unknown, but sources estimated several thousand active members. However the IMU has been declared a terrorist group by the United States government and United Nation organization, because of the alleged help it had received from the Taliban and also from world terrorist Osama Bin Laden.

In response to these conditions the Uzbek authorities have aspired not to neutralize Islam, but to adapt it to the reforms in the country. However, the state has tried to adapt

Islam's peculiar role in the every day life of the society, in Muslim culture, traditions, spiritually, in forming of peoples' cultural heritage to involve the believers into the strengthening of the process of national independence. The president of Republic of Uzbekistan I. A. Karimov in his book *Uzbekistan on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, wrote that: The authorities of state support the ideas that religion should accomplish its role in introducing the highest spiritual moral and ethic values, historic and cultural heritage among the population. And we will never admit religious slogans to be used in the struggle for power, or as the pretext for intervention in politics, economy and legislation, because in this we see a serious potential threat to stability and security for the Uzbek state.

The government's actual goal is to reclaim Islam, evaluate and re-establish principles of Islam in the population consciousness. The Uzbek government, knowing political goals and intention of Islamic political groups that actively using agenda, has also worried to the questions of work with the youth population. Because as the fact the future of the country depends on the young generation, that will serve to the country's prosperity.

Analyzing the current situation in my country about Islam it is clear that the officials of Uzbekistan do not fight against the Islam faith, but they act to stop the rise of extremism and violence, not just in the country scale, but also entire Central Asia region. Western experts have their own concepts and opinions about Islam role in Uzbekistan. These experts believe that the state authorities have fought against freedom of religion and limit believers' rights on the religion. Unfortunately they, Western experts, have gotten wrong conclusions because the authorities of Uzbekistan have acted to protect the



peaceful Uzbek citizens from terrorism acts and vandalism. The opposition religious group IMU has claimed to represent the only true Muslim society in Uzbekistan. But to do this task IMU had used dangerous strategies on both sides as among the people and as against the government of the state. As the fact that members of IMU for their acts were found guilty for using violence against the Uzbek government and also non-members. For example on February 16, 1999 in Capital City Tashkent were series of four bomb attacks on various key government buildings. Those dramatic events left 16 dead and more than one hundred injured innocent people.

The people of Uzbekistan, who involved into different religious organizations, and who will enter into religious sects, can learn from the conflict in neighboring Tajikistan during the period of 1992-97, where Islamic fanatics used force to challenge the state authority. The Tajik government and the opposition group finally resolved their disagreements by political method and a negotiated solution of the problem was found. This solution of the Tajik problem fits to Western opinion, because Western experts think that a official acceptance by the government any kind of religion and non religion groups or organizations as an official party, which is opposed to official government, is positive results for solving a problem. Here I agree with political method of resolving a problem, but giving official place for the Tajik religion opposition group the needs of the Tajik people or living standards until today have not resolved.

In my point of view the reason of all conflicts are finance and power. To describe first factor I want to say that it is not coins or notes; it is the new trade market, the sources of raw materials, and an advantageous in the geographical location of the territory etc. In while the religion of Islam from its background is peaceful. Islamic

fundamentalists and nationalist leaders use the religion as the instrument to motivate people to fight against government policy. Now we have witnessed as an example of appeals to declare Jihad by some leaders of religion and terrorist organization to response to military actions of coalition forces in Afghanistan. The radical and extremist leaders also try to present terrorist actions as a war against people of other faith. But a main reason of this opposition is again finance. Leaders of these terrorist organizations appear to be rich individuals. They have almost everything for satisfaction of their needs. According to the situation in Uzbekistan I can say that if some day the leaders of IMU will get some agreement with officials of the country and to register IMU as the official party in Uzbekistan parliament they will not stop on their anti-government campaigns. They will continue to press for more concessions from government. They are obsessed with the desire to change the state order in Uzbekistan. This group attempt to use the power and influence of Islam within Uzbekistan population to further political ambitions. Islam is not only religion, but also it is way of thinking, political and spiritual background of the state and faithful of people.

To discuss as second main factor such as power I can say that acts from radical Islamists are a war for changing general political, financial and cultural situations in the world scale. In 1991 the beginning of the independence the opposition leaders Muhammad Saliq Muhammad Yusuf on one his speeches said that “In Uzbekistan the Muslim community is a single party of Allah, and the state has no need for other parties”. I think that this is a strong totalitarian form of ruling a state. Islamic fundamentalism offers religious approaches to political power. It wants power in order to coerce mankind into obeying God’s commands; it even wants to enforce the advent of the Kingdom of

God itself.<sup>9</sup> Here I want to discuss about two questions. The first is what would have happened if the authorities of Uzbekistan had failed to Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan opposition group during the period of independence and when opposition group had started to destabilize the region? The second is what would happen if the religious activists were to take power in Uzbekistan today? The most proper answer is that Uzbekistan would become the next Afghanistan in Central Asia region. After would happen mass killings (of anyone opposing the new revolutionary fundamentalist government); clubs with restaurants, swimming pool, tennis courts, theatre and playgrounds would be closed. Television programs would be abolished and the veil would become obligatory.

However there is also another important reason why radical Islam can increase its membership. Explanation for this aspect is expansion of economic and social needs of people. The collapse of Soviet Union rapidly catapulted the country into the international arena with the economic difficulties in the region. The collapse of Soviet Union was happened for many reasons and economic disability was one of them. Under socialism, Uzbekistan as other former states of Central Asia was used only as supplier of raw materials. The Republic of Uzbekistan was limited and not allowed building the kind of production centers that would enable them to exploit their wealth. After disintegration of Soviet Union the Republic of Uzbekistan in spite of its economic difficulties learned that the country had to make its own way into the world. Today this task has become not easy for the Uzbek nation. The percentage of unemployment high among the young population particularly who live in villages. The economic stress has helped provide additional recruits for militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. In general about this

situation I can say that IMU had increased its membership using economic difficulties of the country during the transition period. I think that young people are idealistic and they always looking for a cause. And if they are unemployed and have unclear future without work or without career of course they will turn to idealistic solution, simply to think how to earn some money for satisfaction their needs. Thus in this situation the unemployment youth population of the country has become a friendly environment with radical Islamic groups because leadership of IMU has finance supports from outside the country that they are giving to young recruits money for living. So in this situation outwardly the region seems ripe for encounter with fundamentalism, the radical, militant brand of Islam, which uses religion as stepping-stone to political power. Leaders of fundamental religion organization are willing to be carried along on a wave of socio-economic difficulties, while secular politicians provide financial support for the religious pioneers who will say and do things.<sup>10</sup> Inspire of the economical difficulties the people of Uzbekistan who has involved into Islamic different religion organizations must understand that political Islamists do not have an economic strategy for solving the economic crisis in the country, just they have a short-term socio-economic program for supporting a poor and an unemployment people to increase its membership. Fundamentalist leaders are effective in exploiting the ideological inconsistencies and policy failures of non-fundamentalist governments and in mobilizing large number of people for intense and highly visible short-term rallies or project, and smaller numbers of very loyal workers to sustain the long-term life of the organization or movement.<sup>11</sup>

The next cause the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country is ignorance the people of Islam. During the period of seventy-four years of the Soviet Union regime the

role of Islam as other religions in the culture of people was largely de- intellectualized, surviving mainly in its ritual and traditional forms and its tenets among the people were unknown. Prolonged isolation from the sources of knowledge about the religion of Islam led to almost universal ignorance about the basic tenets. The generation that had grown up within the Soviet system has needed to learn more about Islam and to practice on their life. Today having no basic knowledge about Islam the young masses has followed to that direction where Islamic politicians have led them. Another reason or factor behind the growth of radical Islam could be the inability of the main Uzbek religion clergy to respond to new demands in society, which leads many people to turn to the Islamist instead. There is the absence of true religious solidarity in the region that as well as could effect to against the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Again there should be no doubt that the religion of Islam is peaceful, and it is not the main issue today, but it is used as an instrument in a political struggle in many different Islamic states.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONCLUSION**

The past decade has seen a major growth in interest in Islam after decades of Soviet efforts to weaken its public and private influence. The independence has made it plain that during the years of militant atheism, Islam survived as a cultural-religious phenomenon. The ideological void created by the collapse of Marxism-Leninism nurtured the Islamic consciousness and raised concern about the practical implications for the latter's renaissance and its impact on the region's political development. This concern is warranted, considering the Islamic fundamentalism or extremism prevailing in some Islamic states.

Uzbekistan can only be victorious over anti-governmental fundamentalism with help of a more moderate faith, where Islamic clergies will play significant role. Acts from Uzbek clergy to lessen Islamic fundamentalism are vital, particularly in the new independent state during the period of revival. If the traditional clergy is not able to win back the hearts and minds of the people, take the initiative, and try as well as to build a religious solidarity of the people they will lose to the fundamental Islamist. There is no doubt that official clergies will help to local Uzbek population and learn more about Islam. Thus, the state officials should aware this aspect and to help for religious clergies to teach for basic tenets of Islam to the people who are far from Islam. The state

authorities working closely with religious clergies will guaranty to the future stability of Uzbekistan. Official clergies having a support from the state authority they will organize teaching and educating process of Islam tenets. Hopefully that some day the Uzbek youth will have a basic conception and understanding of more moderate tenets of Islam and as well as resist those radical religion organizations. These activities will be supporting the future stability and security of entire Central Asia region.

Another aspect that must be addressed is socio-economic situation in the country because this situation also plays a contributory role in the rising Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan. On this aspect for the improvement of the socio-economic situation my proposals would be that the authorities should enlarge economic integration with Western states. According to IMF staff report BISNIS and Risk 1999/2000 that Uzbekistan is one of the world largest natural gas and cotton producer.<sup>1</sup> Increased partnerships in the fields such as oil and agricultural production could result in mutual benefit for both groups. Uzbekistan should go out from the isolation, because its seems that Uzbekistan is limited its cooperative agreements with other neighboring countries, especially with the former the Soviet countries. Every state should have as well as a good relationship with neighbors and Uzbekistan also has deals with neighbors in Central Asia region for sake of future prosperity and it is positive ways of development. But when these neighboring states also have similar economic difficulties, in my point of view these regiments will not significantly improve the current economic situation. However the state authorities should demand more investments and modern technologies to develop country's economic infrastructure. This form of globalization will offer some hope that Uzbekistan can successfully meet its current economic challenges. In addition that more resources



should be channeled directly into improving living standard of the people, particularly among the young population of the country. Increase and provide more employment opportunities to provide a future for the Uzbek young people.

To reduce influence of foreign Islamic radicals the Uzbek authorities should concentrate their efforts for strong government media outlets. These outlets should clearly communicate to the people about the dangerous of religious extremism and need for all the peoples of Uzbekistan to cooperate economically and religious tolerance.

Thus summarizing this research I want to appeal the people of Uzbekistan who have become involved to different religious groups that they must understand Islamic fundamentalist's intention, if so Islamic fundamentalism in the country will be unable to achieve a massive following on the country scale. However the world community should agree with the government's policies about the need to control political Islam throughout Uzbekistan and to enhance cooperation not just with the Uzbek nation, but also with all Central Asian states for stability and security of the entire region.

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